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SUBJECT: LIDA AUTHORITIES ALLOW NON-PARTY AFFILIATED
OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES

REF: MINSK 457

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

1. (C) Opposition and civil society activists in Lida are permitted to conduct most activities without hindrance and sometimes in cooperation with the local authorities so long as they refrain from organizing such events in their capacity as political party activists. The local Belarusian National Front Head told Deputy Pol/Econ Chief that he attempts to have a dialogue with the local officials and that overall relations between civil society activists and the local government are good. After thanking the U.S. for its support of detained youth activists, he also called for closer ties to Europe and more open borders to the West. End summary.

Lida Authorities Leave Non-Party Affiliated Activists Alone

2. (C) Local Belarusian National Front (BNF) Head in the western city of Lida Stanislav Sudnik told Deputy Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff that party activists in Lida are able to hold events and work on issues important to the opposition between elections so long as they conduct their activities as civil society activists, rather than as political actors. For example, the Lida authorities allowed Sudnik to organize a march in remembrance of the Chernobyl disaster when he arranged it in his capacity of head of the local chapter of the NGO Belarusian Language Association and not as head of the local BNF. In addition, the Lida branch of the Protestant New Life Church commented to Deputy Pol/Econ Chief that despite difficulties in renting a building for their church, they had not been visited or harassed by the authorities. Even the Malady Front youth activists have not experienced much harassment, according to Sudnik, although he added that most are refraining from being overtly active before the end of the academic year in order to receive their diplomas.

3. (C) Sudnik commented that the overall relations between the local government and opposition and civil society activists were good. As one of the co-founders of the local NGO Printing Press Organization, Sudnik worked with the GOB to find an appropriate hall to host an event. Although the hall he originally requested was unavailable, the GOB offered two other options. He noted that his goal was to have a dialogue, not a stand-off, with the authorities.

Closer Ties with the West is the Way to Change

14. (C) Sudnik, as well as local Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Gramada" Head Ales Sudar, opined that economic or social crises will not result in an explosive revolution by the people or demands for regime change in Belarus. Instead, Sudnik called for increased ties with Europe and more open borders to bring about democratic change in the country. He acknowledged the strong U.S. support for democratic efforts in Belarus and thanked us for the role that we played in minimizing the sentences for the Malady Front activists (reftel).

Comment

15. (C) It appears that the local authorities in Lida are more forgiving of the activities of opposition and unregistered civil society activists than in many other minor Belarusian cities so long as they are not overtly political. Even our treatment from the authorities was more evenhanded; our contacts later told us that the local media's coverage of our visit was neutral, which is an improvement when compared to the negative coverage that we regularly receive on national weekly news programs. We will examine the level of GOB scrutiny and harassment in other smaller regional towns to determine the extent to which these towns could serve as more fertile places to focus our support for opposition activists' democratic efforts.

Stewart